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ABSTRACT

Questionnaires are important research tools despite their unpopularity. They are generally less costly per response than other techniques, may elicit more candid answers, provide more time for respondents to consider their replies, and do not introduce interviewer or observer bias. The rate of return is an indication of the usefulness of a questionnaire. The number of returns are affected by several factors, but only the method of distribution, the kind of information requested, and the status of respondents are considered here. At Emporia Kansas State College, students working on masters research projects who used questionnaires were studied. Of the four methods of questionnaire distribution: U.S. mail, personal distribution by researcher, distribution by other persons, and campus mail, personal distribution was the most effective method in getting returns. There was little, if any, relationship between the information requested and response rate. Analysis of rate of return and status of subjects was inconclusive, with college and university educators at the lowest rate for any group. (Author/BJG)

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QUESTIONNAIRES: Their Rate of Return

by

John S. Goodell

When someone says he is going to send out a questionnaire to gather data on one thing or another, the general reaction is one of dismay--"Not another questionnaire!" Questionnaire pollution is a topic sure to arouse strong, and often negative, feelings. Poorly constructed instruments seem to abound. One hears of librarians who claim they receive so many questionnaires that they must devote a significant part of each day to completing them. Others state they discard all but a few essential ones because they feel this is the only practical policy. Yet, in spite of all this criticism, the questionnaire remains as one of the most commonly used research tools. Among other advantages, questionnaires are generally less costly per response than other techniques, may elicit more candid answers, provide more time for respondents to consider their replies, and do not introduce interviewer or observer bias.

This much maligned technique has served researchers in many fields, including library science. Even though there seems to be a general negative reaction to this method, its usefulness may be gauged by the number of studies which have employed it. And, just as the proof of the pudding lies in the eating, the vindication

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of the questionnaire lies in whether or not it achieves its objective. The rate of return is an indication of this achievement, since it represents an expenditure of time and effort to provide the requested data on the part of the respondent. This willingness is of vital importance to library educators who advise student researchers who utilize this data collection method. The success of student research, and much other library research, depends upon the continued co-operation of library practitioners and others. The experience of the School of Library Science at Emporia Kansas State College shows the field is receptive to student research efforts in general and questionnaires in particular.

During 1972-73 and early 1974, EKSC students completed 109 masters research projects. Of these, 69, or 63.3%, used questionnaires. However, in order to obtain a better picture of the effectiveness of this technique, further analyses were done to determine the overall percentage of return and the return rates by method of distribution, kind of information requested, and status of respondents (i.e., librarians, students, educators, parents, etc.). When these analyses were attempted, 11 studies had to be deleted because they did not contain enough information or were organized in such a way they did not lend themselves to analysis. For example, one study examined copying machine use by a series of interviews and questionnaires which were placed on the machines along with instructions and boxes for completed ones. In this case there was no way to determine the number of

copy machine users who simply ignored the displays, and in so doing became non-respondents. After this study and the other ten were removed from the group to be analyzed, 58 studies remained.

These 58 projects resulted in a total of 8,099 questionnaires being sent out and 5,929 being received. These figures yield an overall percentage of return of 73.2% with a rather large range between the lowest and highest. The lowest rate of return was 37.5% in one study, and the highest was 100% in 12 studies. However, not all questionnaires which were returned were usable; five of the studies reported a total of 64 unusable returns. Yet, they were returned and so have been counted as such.

The number of returns is probably affected by several factors--the format and length of the instrument, the type of questions asked, the mood of the recipient, and many others. As mentioned above, this article will examine three: the method of distribution, the kind of information requested, and the status of the respondents.

There were four methods of distribution used: the U. S. mail, which was the most common (39 studies); personal distribution by the researcher (11 studies); distribution by other persons (7 studies); and campus mail (3 studies). Two studies used more than one method and so were counted twice. An examination of Table 1 reveals personal distribution was the most effective method in getting returns, and distribution by persons other than the researcher was the least effective. The other two methods, U. S. mail and campus mail, had rates of 71.3% and 72.9% respectively, both of which were just under

Table 1.-Number and Percentage of Studies and Returns by Method of Distribution

Method	No. of Studies*	Percent- age of Studies	No. of Question- naires Dist.	No. of Question- naires Returned	Percent- age of Returns by Method
U. S. Mail	39	65.0%	4,687	3,342	71.3%
Personally Distributed by Researcher	11	18.3%	1,385	1,274	92.0%
Distributed by Other Persons	7	11.7%	1,857	1,189	64.0%
Campus Mail	<u>3</u>	<u>5.0%</u>	<u>170</u>	<u>124</u>	<u>72.9%</u>
TOTAL	60	100.0%	8,099	5,929	73.2%**

*Two studies used more than one method of distribution and are listed twice, once under each method.

**Overall percentage of returns: $(5,929 \div 8,099) \times 100$.

the overall rate of 73.2%. These figures seem to indicate that it is easier to obtain a high level of return by personally presenting the instruments to the subjects. This might be expected because the researcher would be likely to have a strong interest in the study and press for completion and return of the questionnaires in a more persuasive manner than would be possible with the other approaches.

The second possible factor affecting returns was the kind of information being requested. It was thought that requesting information of a personal nature might result in fewer responses than

asking for less personal data, for example. Table 2 shows the categories used along with the number and percentage of questionnaires returned for each category. There seems to be little, if any, relationship between the information requested and the response rate.

Table 2 also presents data on the extent of use and effectiveness of follow-ups. Generally, follow-ups had a low rate of return. This is not surprising because those who do not answer on the first distribution are probably not as interested in the study as those who respond promptly. Many studies did not have follow-ups because the rate of return was deemed satisfactory for the purposes of the project or a follow-up was not practical.

The last factor which was analyzed was the status of the subjects. Some groups of respondents such as librarians might be more inclined to complete and return questionnaires they receive from library school students than would other groups, library patrons, for instance. Table 3 shows there are some differences among the groups; but, many of these may be due to factors other than the status of the subjects. For example, school students had a 100% rate of return, which is what would be expected when it is realized that the questionnaires were distributed in class. On the other hand, the lowest rate for any group was 57.8% for college and university educators. These were distributed mainly by U. S. and campus mails and dealt with one aspect or another of library use. Librarians, library school graduates, and all students taken together had almost exactly the same overall return rate, approximately 76%, with the remaining

Table 2.-Number and Percentage of Questionnaires by Kind of Information

Kind of Information	No. Sent on Initial Dist.	No. Returned from Initial Dist.	% Returned from Initial Dist.	No. Sent on Follow-up	% Returned from Follow-up	No. Returned from Follow-up	% Returned from Follow-up	Total No. Return- ed	Total % Re- turned
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)		
Use of Libraries	2,264	1,528	67.5%	59	20	33.9%	1,548	68.4%	
Reading	2,052	1,410	68.7%	3	0	0.0%	1,410	68.7%	
Policies & Procedures:									
Collection Org. & Use	89	74	83.2%	0	0	0.0%	74	83.2%	
Selection & Weeding	459	349	76.0%	43	21	48.8%	370	80.6%	
Duties of Student Assistants	67	60	89.6%	0	0	0.0%	60	89.6%	
Cataloguing	376	275	73.1%	0	0	0.0%	275	73.1%	
Circulation	127	92	72.4%	8	5	62.5%	97	76.4%	
Other	80	52	65.0%	0	0	0.0%	52	65.0%	
Subtotal	1,198	902	75.3%	51	26	51.0%	928	77.5%	

Table 2.-Continued.

Kind of Information	No. Sent on Initial Dist.	No. Returned from Initial Dist.	% Returned from Initial Dist.	No. Sent on Follow-up	No. Returned from Follow-up	% Returned from Follow-up	Total No. Returned	Total % Returned	Total No. Returned	Total % Returned
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)		
Opinions of Librarians on:										
Censorship	339	225	66.4%	0	0	0.0%	225	66.4%		
Effectiveness of Volunteers	21	21	100.0%	0	0	0.0%	21	100.0%		
Subtotal	360	246	68.3%	0	0	0.0%	246	68.3%		
Opinions of Others on:										
Role of the Library	34	34	100.0%	0	0	0.0%	34	100.0%		
Current Issues	531	455	78.3%	55	8	14.6%	463	79.7%		
Librarians/Libraries	593	541	91.2%	0	0	0.0%	541	91.2%		
Subtotal	1,208	1,030	85.3%	55	8	14.6%	1,038	85.9%		
Education of Librarians	429	302	70.4%	0	0	0.0%	302	70.4%		
Employment Data on Librarians	350	289	82.6%	61	12	19.7%	301	86.0%		
Other	238	156	65.6%	0	0	0.0%	156	65.6%		
TOTAL	8,099	5,863	72.4%	229	66	28.8%	5,929	73.2%		

Table 3.-Number and Percentage of Returns of Questionnaires by Group

Groups	No. Sent on Initial Dist.	No. Returned from Initial Dist.	% Returned from Initial Dist.	No. Sent on Follow-up	No. Returned from Follow-up	% Returned from Follow-up	Total No. Returned	Total No. Returned	% Returned
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	
Librarians:									
School	1,108	817	73.7%	43	21	48.8%	838	838	75.6%
Public	215	170	79.1%	0	0	0.0%	170	170	79.1%
Academic	631	477	75.6%	8	5	62.5%	482	482	76.4%
Special	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Subtotal	1,954	1,464	74.9%	51	26	51.0%	1,490	1,490	76.3%
Students:									
School	646	646	100.0%	0	0	0.0%	646	646	100.0%
College & Univ.:									
Undergraduate	1,558	1,093	70.2%	0	0	0.0%	1,093	1,093	70.2%
Graduate	859	589	68.6%	0	0	0.0%	589	589	68.6%
Subtotal	3,063	2,328	76.0%	0	0	0.0%	2,328	2,328	76.0%

Table 3.-Continued.

Groups	No. Sent on Initial Dist.	No. Returned from Initial Dist.	% Returned from Initial Dist.	No. Sent on Follow-up	No. Returned from Follow-up	% Returned from Follow-up	Total No. Follow-up	Total % Returned	Total No. Returned	Total % Returned
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(7)	(8)
Educators:										
Teachers/Principals	424	392	92.5%	0	0	0.0%	392	92.5%		
College & Univ.	1,215	682	56.1%	59	20	33.9%	702	57.8%		
Subtotal	1,639	1,074	65.5%	59	20	33.9%	1,094	66.7%		
Parents	188	130	69.2%	58	8	13.8%	138	73.4%		
Library School Graduates	430	319	74.2%	61	12	19.7%	331	77.0%		
Patrons	721	486	67.4%	0	0	0.0%	486	67.4%		
Others	104	62	59.6%	0	0	0.0%	62	59.6%		
TOTAL	8,099	5,863	72.4%	229	66	28.8%	5,929	73.2%		

groups, educators, parents, patrons, and others, slightly below them. As the analysis by kind of information requested showed, there were few follow-ups, and they did not add appreciably to the number of returns.

Lack of response is always a problem because those who do not reply may differ in some significant way from those who do respond. In the end, of course, most studies are forced to view the non-respondents as coming from the same population as the respondents. In the case of masters research projects where the major objective is to learn the research process, the consequences of incorrectly assuming that non-respondents are similar to respondents, may not be serious. However, depending on the situation, a low rate of response may severely restrict the value of the study. Any steps which will produce a high level of return should be considered.

Even though these 58 library school student research projects may not be representative of all library research, they do seem to demonstrate a fairly satisfactory rate of return. This rate should be encouraging to library educators who are supervising student research, and it is a tribute to the practicing librarians and others who are concerned about libraries and the services they provide.